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County and state law enforcement agencies chose Deerfield as the site of a successful sting operation last week that reaped 5,000 Ecstasy pills and the arrests of a Skokie man and his Chicago accomplice.

Hieu Van La, 29, of the 9400 block of Kolmar Avenue and Virasack Z. Phoxay, 26, of the 5000 block of North Lowell Avenue, Chicago, were arrested by Deerfield police on March 24 when they tried to sell drugs to an undercover officer. The arrest was made at Lake Cook and Waukegan roads.

Bond was set at \$5 million for Van La, who faces three counts of unlawful delivery, a Class X offense, and three counts of unlawful possession, a Class One offense. Phoxay's bond was set at \$500,000 on one count each of delivery and possession. MEG officials said Phoxay served as a lookout.

Central location

Deerfield was chosen for the sting because of its central location, said Jim Dutton of the Lake County Metropolitan Enforcement Group, one of several agencies involved in setting up the sting. "It was a halfway point and we spread the locations around," Dutton said.

Joining the county and the Deerfield police were the Illinois State Police, the DuPage County Metropolitan Enforcement group and the state police.

Terry Lemming of the Lake County Metropolitan Enforcement Group, said the street value of the 5,000 pills was placed at about \$175,000, roughly \$35 a pill.

The arrest was one of a series made in the Chicago area as part of a stepped up effort at stemming the sale of the so-called club drugs.

At the request of U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-10th, of Highland Park, Lemming made a trip to the Netherlands for that country's first synthetic drug conference. Lemming said the Netherlands is a major source of Ecstasy for two reasons.

"The precursor chemicals are easy to get and the Dutch have a very liberal view of drugs," he said.

Accompanying him on the trip was Kate Patton of Rolling Meadows, another member of Kirk's drug task force. Patton's 23-year-old daughter died from an Ecstasy overdose at a concert in 1999.

"It plays with the mind and affects the brain and the body," Patton said of the drug. "They always think it is the person they read about in the newspaper. I am sure my daughter thought, 'I am sure it won't happen to me.'"

A 2002 survey of Deerfield High School students reported that 4.6 percent of seniors had used Ecstasy in the previous 30 days, while 0.4 percent of sophomores had done so.

Not harmless

As part of an effort to combat the view of Ecstasy as relatively harmless, the Metropolitan Enforcement Group has been making presentations to students, including in Deerfield, Lemming said.

"The experts say one dose can cause permanent brain damage," he said.

While Ecstasy is not addictive, as heroin and cocaine are, the health effects from a single use are more dangerous when compared with the single use of one of those drugs, Lemming said. Memory impairment from Ecstasy use may not be apparent for five to 10 years.

"It's very important to realize that Ecstasy can be used wherever young people gather," Lemming said.

He said behavior is a tell tale sign for parents. "Ecstasy is an amphetamine. It will give them a lot of energy, they will dance and dance and dance and stay out really late, coming home at daybreak," he said.

It also causes involuntary teeth clenching so users have phony pacifiers to relieve this phenomenon, Lemming said.

Drugs everywhere

While in Amsterdam, Lemming and Patton found use of the drug rampant.

"After we got out of the cab, we didn't walk 10 steps before we were offered Ecstasy," Lemming said, adding that was particularly upsetting to Patton.

Patton said she had never heard of Ecstasy before her daughter's death.

"Parents have to educate themselves and not talk at them, but talk with them, or they will just sit there and tune you out," she said.